



Sturges at Work

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Film Quarterly, Vol. 39, No. 2. (Winter, 1985-1986), pp. 16-28.

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Film Quarterly is currently published by University of California Press.

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Sturges at Work

Information newly available makes possible a close study of the development of the films of Preston Sturges from first note to release print.¹ Such a study reveals that the best-known features of Sturges's films—brilliant dialogue, break-neck pace, vivid characters—were in fact the result of tireless revision at every stage of production. The new information also reveals Sturges's interest in comic construction and indeed the dependence of dialogue, pacing, and characterization on the underlying construction of his films.

Sturges had been a Paramount screenwriter for three years, when that studio acceded to his much-repeated demand to direct. Between late September and late November of 1939, he rewrote his 1933 script *The Vagrant*, which he began filming in December as *Down Went McGinty*, later retitled *The Great McGinty* (1940). By the time Sturges left Paramount in December 1943, he had written and directed eight films. For reasons of space, I will pass over *The Great McGinty* and begin with Sturges's second Paramount film, *Christmas in July* (1940), which is probably his most underrated work.

Christmas in July shows Sturges's remarkable development as a screenwriter between the early thirties, when he began, and 1940. *Easy Living* (1937) aside, it is the first full-fledged instance of Sturges's kaleidoscopic comedy, with spiraling misunderstandings that increase steadily in intensity and ill consequences, and spread to more and more characters until its cataclysmic or muted end. *Christmas in July* has more characters, handled more adroitly, than any previous Sturges film. In the office, at Maxford House, in the department store, in the neighborhood—each sequence introduces a brace of new characters, without once slackening the pace or dropping the ball. As good as Sturges's direction of *The Great McGinty* was, his direction of *Christmas in July* was a giant step beyond it.

Underlying these features, making them possible, is the film's remarkable dramatic construction. This is Sturges's least-known virtue but one of his most important, and the

one that gives the others their greatest effectiveness. Construction may be an elusive concept—the better it is the less one notices it. But a study of the revision process allows us to see it taking shape through several stages.

Christmas in July was based on Sturges's unproduced play of 1931, *A Cup of Coffee*, which concerns Jimmy MacDonald, a coffee salesman who wins a slogan contest sponsored by a rival company. Jimmy's affection for the company secretary (Tulip in the play; Betty in the film), provides romance, and the blusterings of the firm's founder and his two sons some characteristic Sturges satire of business. The play takes place entirely at E. Baxter & Sons coffee company in the course of one working day—there are three continuous acts and only two sets, one the interior of an office seen from the outside in the other.

In turning this slight play into a film script, Sturges decided to make new scenes, sometimes whole sequences, out of the implied events that circle around the office-bound events of the play. In the play, for instance, there are no scenes at the rival company (Maxford House), only a man who appears first at the end of Act I to tell Jimmy that he has won the contest, then again at the end of Act II to tell him there has been a mistake and he has not won, and finally at the end of Act III to tell him that he has won after all. For the film, Sturges invents a Maxford House radio program to announce the contest winner, and behind-the-scenes conflicts to explain not only its failure to do so but also, later, the mistaken award of the winner's check to Jimmy. The play's arbitrary reversals of fortune are replaced by office tricksters who send Jimmy a phony telegram that he has won. On this fallacious basis, Jimmy is offered a new job, a raise, and secretary by an impressed Mr. Baxter. Presents for the office staff arrive during Act II of the play—Jimmy bought them between Act I and Act II. However, the film devotes one sequence to Jimmy and Betty's buying presents in a department store—this time for all the people in their neighborhood—and another to their giving them to

Sturges
directing
CHRISTMAS
IN JULY:
Jimmy's
phony
telegram.
(Photos
from FIVE
SCREENPLAYS
BY PRESTON
STURGES
[University
of California
Press, 1985])



their neighbors, and the street party that results. The party is interrupted by the arrival of the department store owner, who has come to reclaim his goods, and of Dr. Maxford, who tears up Jimmy's check.

These new sequences are framed by sequences at Baxter Brothers that correspond to Acts II and III of the play. In Act II Jimmy is offered a new job on the basis of his contest victory; in Act III the truth comes out and he loses everything, until Tulip's plea wins him an opportunity to prove himself without guarantees. Sturges has essentially opened up a gap between Acts II and III of the play, into which he drops the new sequences at Maxford House, the department store, and Jimmy and Betty's neighborhood. The revelation that closes Act II—that Jimmy has not won the contest—is thus postponed by the film for three sequences, which amount to nearly half the film. That revelation, in both play and film, leads directly to the last act or sequence; to forestall the news that Jimmy has not won is to forestall the ending of the film. It is also to prolong Jimmy's state of illusion, at its ripest point, when he thinks he has attained everything he wants.

The play's audience knows only as much as Jimmy knows and at the same time that he knows it; it shares his adventures—victory, defeat, modified victory—on the same basis

as he lives them. The film's audience, on the other hand, knows even before Jimmy receives it about the phony telegram sent by his office-mates. (Their own later reactions to the snow-balling effects of their gag become one more element of the film's complex drama.) Audience experience is thus split—the viewer simultaneously knows that Jimmy is heading for a fall and identifies with his illusion-based exultation. This is an excruciating tension—expertly prolonged and intensified by Sturges—which carries the young couple's dreams, and the audience's pleasure/unpleasure, to their farthest extent.*

In the play Jimmy and Tulip have known each other a few weeks and their relationship is uncertain—Jimmy seems unready for any kind of commitment. When he wins the contest he has a change of heart and asks Tulip to marry him. The film's cascade of events,

*This makes *Christmas in July*, among other things, a precursor of Sturges's later *Hail the Conquering Hero*, in which Woodrow's (and the audience's) dreams of heroism are carried to their limits and beyond—the fantasy gets out of hand even as it is occurring. There too the dreaded exposure of fraud, which is more ignominious than Jimmy's loss of the contest and reversion to clerkhood, is postponed by a series of increasingly manic scenes. (Woodrow, unlike Jimmy, knows that he is involved in a falsehood, which makes his burden of guilt and fear—and the audience's—far greater.)

however, has no room for a romantic complication—there are too many issues to resolve to pose a love issue also. So Sturges makes Jimmy and Betty a long-term couple, who lack only the funds to marry. This is a relationship built to withstand—and to motivate—the demands of the madly spiraling plot.

The two script versions for *Christmas in July* begin with the backstage scenes at Maxford House, then cut to Jimmy and Betty for their reactions and subsequent dialogue. However, the film begins with the couple listening to the radio, then cuts to Maxford House when its program comes on the air. Sturges invented some inconsequential dialogue for this new opening, but what Jimmy and Betty say is less important than the fact that the film begins with them. They are thereby made the center of the film, in relation to whom everything and everyone else in the film are to be evaluated and understood. To pick them up after the contest announcement makes them a function of the contest, rather than it a function of their situation. This also accords better with Jimmy's not winning the contest, as he does in the play, but only thinking he has. The emphasis is thus placed throughout on Jimmy and Betty's aspirations, rather than on a fortuitous contest victory. This makes them easy marks for the office tricksters but, by film's end, they have parlayed their delusion into an actual opportunity.

Finally, *Christmas in July* introduces those multi-character dialogues that are a feature of later films such as *The Palm Beach Story*, *The Miracle of Morgan's Creek*, and *Hail the Conquering Hero*. Similarly, the dialogues between Jimmy and Betty anticipate the intimate bickering of the lovers in those later films. Their exchange after the radio program takes up twelve script pages and is perhaps Sturges's finest achievement in sustained dialogue to that time. Jimmy and Betty ramble from topic to topic and are frequently irritated with one another, yet the flavor of their interaction and the essential points of their background, characters, and dreams are effectively conveyed.

The Lady Eve (1941) underwent, in the whole course of its revision, transformations at least as great as those of *Christmas in July*. Rather than deal with such overall changes

again, however, I will concentrate instead on the successive changes in one segment of *Eve* only. This will emphasize in a different way the extreme care that Sturges took with his scripts, both in the minuteness of his attention and in the persistence of his revisions through every stage of a film's making. It will also emphasize the remarkable integration of his comic dramas, wherein changes in one passage reverberate through the entire film.

In 1938, Paramount producer Albert Lewin asked Sturges to write a screenplay based upon "Two Bad Hats," a Monkton Hoffe story that had been adapted by Jeanne Bartlett in a "synopsis" dated February 12, 1938. Sturges's actual screenplay, written in late 1938, owed so little to the stories on which it was based that Lewin asked him to return to the original in his rewrites. The result of this disagreement was the indefinite postponement of the project, while Sturges went on to write another script for Lewin, *Remember the Night* (1940).

Sturges returned to *Eve* in 1940, by which time *The Great McGinty* had been a great critical and solid commercial success and *Christmas in July* was about to be. Free to do what he wanted with his old screenplay, within the bounds of censorship, Sturges chose to rewrite it extensively. Beginning in late August 1940, he finished a revised screenplay, called *The Lady Eve*, by October 7. Further changes were realized in an October 18 script, which was the shooting script; others were made during the shooting process and, in one important instance, in the editing of the film.

Lewin had criticized the coming together of Eve and Charles as "all too easy," even though such meetings are part of the appealing fantasy of screwball comedy. In any case, Sturges never altered this aspect of the story except to improve the dialogue, from the 1938 script to the finished film. What took him much longer to resolve were the reasons for their breaking up and the right mode of its presentation.

The romance of Jean and Charles takes place over three days. On the first day Jean trips Charles, they go to her cabin for a new pair of shoes, and play cards with her father. Later there is the scene with the snake in Charles's cabin, and the long dialogue on the chaise-longue in Jean's cabin. This sequence

of events remains constant from the 1938 script to the film itself. What does change from version to version, to be finally resolved only in the film itself, is the sequence of events on the second and third days. On the second day, the romance between Charles and Jean reaches its peak, and they make plans for the future; on the third day they part. What happens on the second day, the exact order and nature of its events, determines the nature of the third day's parting and that, in turn, determines the nature of the second half of the film—Jean's revenge—and hence the exact relationship between the two parts of the film.

The events of the second and third days are treated differently in each script version. In the 1938 script, Charles takes Eve all over the ship in an attempt to tell her that he loves her but she cannot hear him because of the engine noise. Nevertheless she gets the message and as a result asks her father not to cheat Charles that evening, which he ignores. Charles is called out after Eve's father pretends to tear up his check and the purser shows him a police photo of Eve and her father. Charles and Eve spend a romantic evening together but when they rejoin the next morning, he is looking at the photograph. Charles tells her "harshly" that the photo arrived the night before, and Eve says, "Then you knew who we were . . . before you told me you loved me," and leaves.

The October 7 script introduces a scene between Jean and Charles on the bow of the ship "against a magnificent sunset," in which he gives his long "I've always loved you" speech. (This replaces the journey-through-the-ship gag and is an important stage in the gradually increasing seriousness of the Jean-Charles romance.) The rest of the second day's events are as before, but the third day's parting scene is now softer in tone—regretful as much as accusatory. Charles confesses somewhat sadly that he received the photo the night before; Jean asks why he did not tell her then, and Charles asks why she did not tell him (that she was a crook) when he said he loved her and asked her to marry him. Jean says she was going to tell him before they married—he must believe that. Charles says he does not know what to think. Jean says, "You wanted to hurt me . . . and make me feel cheap . . . when you knew you didn't



Sturges the busy screenwriter—typing, smoking and phoning all at the same time.

want to marry me any more." Charles replies that he will marry Jean if she wishes, but she says he must feel proud of himself and leaves.

The October 18 script begins the second day with Charles and Eve having breakfast together, as in the other versions, and follows this first with the scene in which Jean tells her father not to cheat Charles, and then with the card game itself. This time, however, Charles is not called away from the table and does not see the photo of Jean and her father. Instead he meets Jean on deck, goes with her to the bow of the boat, and makes his "I've always loved you" speech, which is now the peak of their romantic evening. The next morning Jean tells her father that she plans to marry Charles, and he asks her not to tell Charles "who we are" until they are off the boat. Jean agrees "after a slight pause" and goes off to meet Charles. (This is a new scene in this version, obviously designed to show that Jean intends to tell Charles the truth about herself, and to provide one of the reasons why she has not done so already.) While Charles waits for Jean on deck, Muggsy brings the purser, who shows Charles the photo. In the scene with Jean that follows, he tells her that he had known who she was the night before. In the October 18 script, for the first time, this is a lie; Charles is trying to hurt Jean and, although she says she does not believe him, she is hurt at the possibility that it is so and at his intention to hurt her. This provides a motivation for her revenge in the

second part of the film that is far subtler than it was in the earlier versions. It also implies, and helps create, a more intimate and intense love relation between Jean and Charles, wherein the pretense of betrayal is as wounding as betrayal itself.

Lewin had touched a sore point in the 1938 script when he criticized the fact that Eve does not tell Charles that she is a crook and he “embraces” her in full knowledge that she is one. It seems true that Charles cannot “embrace” Jean with this knowledge and still retain our sympathy—the screwball genre would also be violated if this occurred. It is fascinating, however, that Sturges did not change either of these crucial matters in the nearly two years from the 1938 script to the October 7 script, but changed both in the eleven days that followed.

The film itself smoothes the transitions between scenes—a good-bye scene after the couple breakfasts together is eliminated—but otherwise adheres to the final script’s scheme. The most important change from script to film concerns a scene in which Charles and Jean meet at his New York bank as she tries to cash the palmed check. This scene was shot but eliminated later in the editing. In the 1938 and October 7 scripts, the bank scene follows Charles’s confession that he knew Jean was a crook during their romantic evening together. In the October 18 script, the bank scene follows Charles’s false confession that he knew. In the film itself, Charles’s confession is false and the bank scene that was to follow it is cut.

In itself, the bank scene is ambiguous. In the 1938 and October 7 scripts, Charles’s knowing about Jean before their romantic evening fully motivates her revenge. In both cases, the bank scene might have developed sympathy for Charles by showing him miserable. But when, in the October 18 script, Charles acts in good faith on their romantic evening—even though he lies about it the next day—Jean’s revenge might seem excessive. The bank scene might then serve to reinforce Jean’s revenge drive by presenting Charles as condescending or to otherwise emphasize the social distance between them. On the other hand, the sadness of the scene might undermine Jean’s revenge drive. What all of this suggests is that how the bank scene was played would determine its meaning in



THE LADY EVE: *The missing bank scene.*

itself and its impact on the film as a whole. Since the scene did not survive and since, as written, it seems to cut in several directions at once, it is difficult to assess the scene’s final omission.

The film’s preservation of Charles’s good faith from the October 18 script, combined with its cutting the bank scene present in all previous versions, poses a new context for regarding Jean’s revenge. It also displaces the problem of direction backwards. Without the bank scene, our last view of the lovers is the disembarkation scene, which is played with complete seriousness. Sturges cuts back and forth between two groups. Charles never once looks over at the other group, Muggsy looks over once. The coldness of recently fiery emotions is realized with great restraint by what the characters do not do, which is to acknowledge the existence of the other. Stanwyck in her travelling outfit is already an elegant hunter, her hatred hidden beneath an icy exterior. The scene does not supply, it stands in for the excised, rationalized “motivations” of all previous versions. It thereby locates the spring of Jean’s later actions in a somewhat obscure but powerful realm of interior feeling. The scene thus presents the non-laughing other side of screwball comedy’s battle of the sexes. Perhaps this accounts in part for the enduring power of the film.

Sturges’s films in the forties resemble Godard’s films in the sixties in at least one respect—each may plausibly be regarded as a turning point in its maker’s career, summing up the discoveries of prior work and making possible later developments. It is possible to argue,

nevertheless, that *Sullivan's Travels* (1941) holds a special place among Sturges's turning points because of the work methods that produced it and the new kinds of comic structure, and humor, that it introduced. *The Palm Beach Story* (1942) and *The Miracle of Morgan's Creek* (1944), which exploit and extend the new terrain opened up by *Sullivan*, will also be considered in this section.

The Great McGinty, *Christmas in July*, and *The Lady Eve* had all been rewritten from scripts originally written years earlier. *Sullivan* is the first Sturges script not based upon an earlier script, but conceived and written from first to last in the period immediately prior to its filming. This was also to be Sturges's method of composition for the films that followed *Sullivan*: *The Palm Beach Story*, *The Miracle of Morgan's Creek* and *Hail the Conquering Hero* (1944). (*The Great Moment* [1944] was adapted from an earlier script.)

Sturges's first impulse after completing *The Lady Eve* had been to rewrite his 1935 script, *Song of Joy*, a stinging satire of Hollywood. He submitted it late in 1940 to Twentieth Century-Fox, to whom he owed a picture in exchange for Henry Fonda's participation in *Eve*. Fox's Darryl Zanuck rejected *Song of Joy*, however, as "something out of Preston's trunk"—not realizing that all three of Sturges's prior hits had been based on "trunk items," or that Sturges had in each case so thoroughly overhauled the earlier project as to make it something new.

When Paramount also refused *Song of Joy*, Sturges embarked on *Sullivan*, beginning its script on February 3, 1941. The commercial and critical success of *Eve*, released later that month, put Sturges in a stronger position than he had previously enjoyed, and enabled him, within the limits of commerce and censorship, to make what he wanted to make. This freedom was not immediately affected by a change in the Paramount hierarchy that was to prove momentous for Sturges in the long run: William LeBaron left Paramount for Fox in February 1941 and was replaced by B. G. "Buddy" DeSylva. In March 1941, as a favor to DeSylva, Sturges wrote and directed a new ending for *New York Town* (1941), a Paramount film in trouble. Despite interruptions, Sturges worked steadily on *Sullivan*, beginning with the first sequence and pro-

ceeding in order to the last, and finished it on April 22. A May 3rd script contained responses to censorship points raised by the Hays Office and some other changes, relatively minor, of Sturges's own. Other changes were made during the shooting of the film, which took place from May 7 to early July 1941, and in the editing which followed soon after.

Sturges's earlier scripts and films had also undergone extensive revision in the later stages of their production. What is new in *Sullivan* are the circumstances under which Sturges wrote what we might call the first final script, the version which was the basis for subsequent revisions at all stages. It took approximately six months from the first conception of *Sullivan* to its final editing, which is about how long it had taken Sturges to revise the scripts for and to film each of his first three films. Quantitatively speaking, Sturges's scripts prior to *Sullivan* had received more time and attention than it did, and also had the benefit of two perspectives, since they had each been written at one period and rewritten at another. As a result, however, each of those scripts had one foot in an earlier era; *Sullivan* and the films that followed it were able to leap free into new realms of comic drama.

Sullivan differs from the earlier films in a number of other ways. For one thing, it has eleven sequences, an unusually high number for a Sturges script, reflecting the story's picaresque subject. *Sullivan* is a journey film and, as such, is far more episodic than anything Sturges had done before. Like Cervantes's *Don Quixote*, Ibsen's *Peer Gynt*, or Feuillade's serials, *Sullivan* could, in principle, go on forever. Indeed *Sullivan* renews one's sense of film's narrative power and its capacity for a virtually unlimited variety of scenes and moods. It is also filled with references to and reflections on cinema in general and Hollywood in particular. One might say that Sturges the dramatist dominated his thirties scripts and his first three films as writer-director, but with *Sullivan* he discovers cinema and revels in it.

The other side of the picture is that *Sullivan* lacks the narrative cohesion and the tightly integrated dramatic structure of his first three films, particularly *Christmas in July* and *Eve*. The Miz Zeffie sequence is an example. On his

first journey, Sullivan ends up doing yard work for a lecherous country widow and her sister; later he goes to the movies with them, avoids the widow's advances, and escapes out of a window. The entire sequence, including many jokes about the widow's dead husband, has little connection to the rest of the film. Its beginning serves to get Sullivan away from the studio crowd and its ending sets up his meeting the girl in the diner—when he hitches a ride that takes him, unknowingly, back to Hollywood—but many other kinds of sequence would have served these functions as well. No scene, let alone entire sequence, in *Christmas in July* or *Eve* is comparably as flat in itself or irrelevant to the film as a whole. Each scene, and no other, seems necessary in those films.

It has often been said—Agee was the first—that Sturges mixed the verbal humor of the sound era with the slapstick techniques of silent comedy. *Sullivan* is often cited as typical of this mixture or even its best example, but it appears to me neither typical nor the best. Its slapstick passages often seem heavily applied and somewhat arbitrarily inserted for overtly “rhythmic” considerations—periodically to liven up a conceit that might be regarded by audiences as too intellectual or satiric. The slapstick elements in Sturges's other Paramount films are expertly built up to and descended from, and dramatically prepared and placed so as to release tensions at exactly those points where they have crystallized. Because *Sullivan* is episodic rather than dramatic, the slapstick passages do not grow out of the dramatic process; they only alternate as autonomous passages with the verbal passages.

The flaws in *Sullivan*, however, go hand in hand with what is new in the film, including many kinds of scenes and humor that the earlier films did not permit. Take for instance *Sullivan*'s uncharacteristic treatment of some of its character actors, notably the studio employees ordered to follow Sullivan on his journey. These “eight stooges,” as one of their number calls them, include some of Sturges's most distinctive supporting players—William Demarest, Frank Moran, Torben Meyer, Charles Moore, and Vic Potel. In the earlier films each would have had one or more “star turns” and been given distinctive dia-

logue to speak throughout. Here the studio people are introduced all at once—a squabbling gaggle—and are never much differentiated at any later point. The impression they give, in fact, is that of a *Mad Magazine* cluster of press agents, chauffeurs, photographers, doctors, radiomen, and secretaries. Even the way the secretary's underwear shows in her ungainly sprawls in the tank-yacht chase has a *Mad* aspect. This is only one respect in which *Sullivan* is ahead of its time, opening the way not only to the free-wheeling style of Sturges's own later comedies, but to much of the best postwar comedy as well, including the cartoon-style of Frank Tashlin and the bold departures from narrative of Jerry Lewis (*The Bellboy*, *The Errand Boy*). Equally ahead of its time is the boy whippet-tank commander who gets Sullivan away from the studio crowd. He is the infernal child of the day's technology, not only abreast of it but coequal with it, and therefore a monster. He walks from *Sullivan's Travels*, by way of *Mad* and the *National Lampoon*, into *The Loved One* (1965), by which time the speed-demon driver has become a homemade-rocket engineer (Paul Williams).

These cartoon effects and the other exaggerations of *Sullivan* imply a greater distance from its characters and plot than we find in the earlier films, and this affects the film's romantic story line as well. *Eve* and *Sullivan*, made back-to-back, are a natural pair for comparison on this point, even though they seem to belong to different universes of cinema. We have traced Sturges's careful rewriting of the Charles-Jean romance in *Eve*, and the increasing seriousness of the affair that resulted. Without ceasing to be a comedy, the film treats the romance with surprising tenderness: its inner dimension is emphasized as much as its social and satirical aspect. None of this is true of the romance in *Sullivan*, which seems arbitrary and not very believable by comparison. The affections of The Girl—she has no other name in script or film—seem puppyish, and Sullivan stolidly refuses them until his unlikely marriage proposal, shouted in a hectic crowd scene, at the end of the film. It was said of Sturges in the thirties that he could not write a good love scene. There are exceptions to this, but the tender emotions of romantic scenes and the logic of romantic



Sturges directing Veronica Lake in SULLIVAN'S TRAVELS.

situations did, perhaps, come hard to him. The romantic sections of *Sullivan* were written once and not much changed subsequently. Perhaps when Sturges had less time—and wrote more freely?—the result was a far more externalized, even cartooned version of romance; or simply a posited or conventional romantic attachment, usually ridiculed in one way or other. (Buster Keaton, like Sturges a non-sentimentalist, also resorted to cartoon—*Seven Changes*—or parodied convention—*Sherlock Jr.* and many other films—in presenting the obligatory romance.)

Transitional works such as *Sullivan's Travels* often reveal tensions and difficulties. Its episodic, and to some degree unconnected, narrative form and its treatment of some of its characters indicate the transitional nature of the film. From the perspective of the earlier films, it represents a falling off in dramatic-narrative cohesion, in character differentiation, perhaps even in dialogue. From the perspective of later Sturges and, indeed, of later comedy, these “failures” are the portals to a new kind of comedy—to structures and effects that could not have been achieved within Sturges's older, “classical” forms.

The Palm Beach Story, one of Sturges's most delightful films, is the complete antithesis of “the well-made play,” or screenplay, but achieves cohesion on the new ground that *Sullivan's Travels* opened up but did not master, stranded as it was between old and new modes, the “well-made” tradition and its modern opposite. *The Palm Beach Story* goes all the way over to the side of disintegration—it seems to be simultaneously falling apart and reinventing itself continually.

The Palm Beach Story is also a picaresque, a kind of female version of *Sullivan's Travels*. Here it is Gerry who sets out on a journey, meets a variety of strange characters, and has a number of diverse adventures. Perhaps it is Sturges's *Juliet of the Spirits* following his *8½*, an attempt to redo an earlier film in the register of another gender. If *Sullivan's Travels* is no match for *8½*, *The Palm Beach Story* is much better than *Juliet*. Sullivan is rendered externally, unlike Fellini's Guido, and as a result we do not take him seriously as an artist. But Fellini fails to render Juliet's inner life, or to connect it meaningfully to her outer life, whereas Sturges's exterior view of Gerry's adventures in a male-dominated society opens up a rich field of trenchant observation.

Sturges wrote the script from early September to early November 1941, calling it first *Is Marriage Necessary?*, which was rejected by the Breen Office, then *Is That Bad?*, and finally *The Palm Beach Story*. Shooting took place between late November 1941 and late January 1942. Comparing the February 7 dialogue continuity to the script shows very little change—less than that between the final script and film of any other Sturges film. In its work methods and in its structure, *The Palm Beach Story* confirms, and fulfills, the directions initiated by *Sullivan's Travels*.

Nearly all of Sturges's early work on the script had to do with its central premise—exactly what circumstances are to set Gerry off on her journey? Sturges never required half a film, as many directors did, to elaborate its premise. He established his premises and exploded them into action practically at the same time—usually in the first scene. *Sullivan's* opening is perhaps the best example—when the fast talk between Sullivan and the producers is over, he is already on his way.

In Sturges's initial version of the opening scene of *The Palm Beach Story*, Gerry “muffs the breakfast” one morning in the suburban house she shares with her husband Tom, burning the toast, breaking the cream bottle, and letting the coffee boil over. The burnt coffee smell wakes Tom “who departs minus breakfast and half dressed for the commuter train which he misses.” Tom comes back to tell his wife off and in so doing misses the second train. He catches the third train but arrives late for work and is fired. When he

returns home that night, Gerry tells him she is no good for him and, besides, they don't love each other any more. She then kisses him passionately, which only irritates him under the circumstances. She says, "You'll see, some men would give their life for that," and they are off on a long dialogue that moves toward her actually leaving. Sturges does not quite get to that point in his early drafts—he is still working out the reasons, short term and long term, for her departure.

Sturges devoted several weeks to reworking the film's opening scene, moving gradually toward the version that appears in the script and the film. In this film and in *Sullivan's Travels*, Sturges seemed to need to get the premise of the film, embodied in its first scene, exactly right, so that everything else would flow logically from it—if not inevitably, at least plausibly. The opening scenes of these films launch the main character on his or her journey. Sturges did not have time for comprehensive rewrites of the scripts for *Sullivan* and the later films. Perhaps he felt that if he got the premise of the film right, it would suffice to write the basic script in one draft and polish it in the censorship, shooting, and editing stages. That, in any case, is how he most often proceeded after *Sullivan*.

The film's opening sequence alters Sturges's early versions of it considerably, but does an admirable job of establishing the premise and setting the plot in motion. We see Tom try to sell a crackpot invention—we know immediately he's a failure—while Gerry is being given \$700 by a rich old man called the "Weenie King," who is looking at the apartment that she and Tom can no longer afford. She pays their bills with the money and takes Tom out to dinner with the change. Then, when they are at least for the moment free and clear, she acts on her apparently long-held conviction to leave the marriage, for Tom's sake as much as her own. She backslides enough to spend the night with her husband—we know from this that they still love each other—but still leaves him the next morning. This amusing opening launches the film in a surprisingly sturdy manner. No opening could logically prepare the later events of the film—the appearance of the Ale and Quail Society, for example. This is one difference between

Sturges's early and late films. The trick instead was to launch Gerry's journey so surely that the film would withstand all manner of later digressions and interruptions, and this it does.

Sturges finished shooting *Palm Beach* in late January 1942 and its editing soon after. Now his own producer, he chose to film next *Triumph Over Pain*, a biographical and mainly non-comic script that he had written in 1939 about the dentist who allegedly first used ether. He quickly revised the script in February and March, shot the film in April and May, and had a fully edited version by July—less than six months overall. Buddy DeSylva opposed the project from the beginning—he loathed its title and subject and found its complex flashback structure incomprehensible. He had the film recut and, after Sturges had left the studio, released it in 1944 as *The Great Moment*. By no means Sturges's best script, *Triumph Over Pain*—and what Paramount's cutters did to the film based on it—nevertheless deserves close study, a process that cannot be started here.

The enmity that Sturges incurred with *Triumph Over Pain* cast a shadow over the making of his next (and last) films for Paramount, *The Miracle of Morgan's Creek* (1944) and *Hail the Conquering Hero* (1944). That Sturges embarked on *Morgan's Creek* under these circumstances was a bold maneuver indeed. James Curtis remarks: "For a more timid soul, it would be time to fall back to safer, more proven territory, to 'run for cover.' [Instead] he chose to write a story that no reasonable man could expect to film unhindered."² To begin the project, Sturges wrote an undated two-page plot outline of *Morgan's Creek*, an "original story" which Paramount approved for development into a shooting script; he followed a similar procedure for *Hero*. Before *Triumph Over Pain*, no story summaries had been required for Sturges's scripts—production approval was apparently given rather casually.

In all, Sturges wrote four script versions of *Morgan's Creek*, only one of which is complete. The first, comprising work from September 10 to October 1, ends with a brief version of Norval's arrest after he and Trudy attempt to get married under assumed names.

The second, dated October 8–10, is no more than the first version with a recast and much expanded version of the attempted wedding and the uproar, now huge, that follows it. From October 14 to 19, Sturges launched a third version that got only as far as the middle of the marriage scene. This version responded to memos from Luigi Luraschi, Paramount's in-house censorship expert, but it by no means settled Sturges's problems with the censors. On the 21st, the day shooting began, Joseph Breen sent a seven-page, single-spaced letter detailing Hays Office objections to the second script version: Trudy must not be shown drunk on her night out with the soldiers; her pregnancy must be touched upon lightly; much of the doctor's and the lawyer's dialogue must be cut and a scene in church completely removed; etc. On the same day, De Sylva sent Sturges a blunt memo insisting that Trudy be hit on the head rather than shown, or implied, as drunk. On October 27, Luraschi reported to Sturges the Hays Office's objections to the third script version—fewer than there had been to the second but still requiring immediate attention. At this point the script was still far from finished. Meanwhile, the actual filming of *Morgan's Creek* was also being monitored; Luraschi wrote Sturges on the 28th: "We have seen today's rushes and wish to call your attention to the screeching of the tires. In view of the Government's rubber conservation program, it will be necessary to eliminate this screeching when dubbing."

Additional memos followed almost daily—one has the sense that Paramount censorship and the Hays Office were working full-time on *Morgan's Creek*. Agee's remark that the censors were raped in their sleep by the film is thus incorrect: they may have been raped, ultimately, but they were not sleeping. They were defeated less by Sturges perhaps than by their own certainty that meanings can be policed.

The final script was finished on December 10, just eighteen days before the end of shooting. This remarkable document, a kind of palimpsest, contains some pages from the October 14–19 version, interspersed with later replacement pages, and new passages—including a prologue reviving the Governor and the Boss from *The Great McGinty*, which was added in late November—and a conclusion,

including a return to McGinty and the Boss, which was added in December. Censorship objections kept pace with Sturges's progress on the script, even in its final stages. Thus a November 24 memo demands some changes in the prologue, a December 1 memo requires a dialogue change, etc.

The result of this conflict-ridden gestation is perhaps the most outrageous comedy ever made in Hollywood, a genuinely black comedy, worthy to stand with Faulkner's *Sanctuary* and Nathaniel West's *The Dream Life of Balso Snell*, *Miss Lonelyhearts*, *A Cool Million*, and *Day of the Locust*. André Bazin says correctly, "Sturges delights in forcing upon his characters—who are totally unfit to deal with these situations—the entire weight of the prejudices, social conventions, and social imperatives that could exist in a small American town in wartime."³ More disturbing, however, is the fact that Trudy and Norval seem unprepared for life itself. Adulthood seems hopelessly beyond them, and there are no models or traditions in view to help them.

In regard to structure and tone, *Morgan's Creek* reflects the lessons of *Sullivan* and *Palm Beach* and applies them in new ways. *Sullivan* introduced new kinds of comedy and comic characterization at the edges of Sullivan's journey, as certain of those who accompany him and others whom he meets on the way. The new characters stand alongside more traditional Sturges figures such as The Girl, Sullivan's butler and valet, the producers, etc. *Palm Beach* intensifies this tendency. All the characters whom Gerry meets along her way—the Weenie King, the Ale and Quail Society, John D. Hackensacker, the Princess, Toto—are living cartoons. Still, Gerry and Tom, or at least their love for each other, are presented seriously. (The film's surrealist framing footage, however, puts the plot as a whole, including their relationship, in brackets.) In *Morgan's Creek* the cartoon stylization reaches to the heart of the film. It is now the main characters themselves, played by Eddie Bracken and Betty Hutton, who are cartoons.* Placing such characters at the center of the work, however, obliges Sturges to take them seriously—a paradox, but one that became fun-

*The other characters in *Morgan's Creek* are much less cartoonish than the principals.

damental to comic art in the postwar period—Heller, Southern, Kubrick, etc. However, the cartoon status of the characters in these works is not only a new mode of rendering but also a reflection of those gigantic social forces—determining and stereotyping our lives—that were brought into being by the total mobilization for World War II and that persist in the postwar period.

Hail the Conquering Hero may seem like a continuation of *Morgan's Creek*. Both films are set in small towns—indeed they were shot on the same set. Eddie Bracken plays the hapless lead in each—Norval is 4-F, Woodrow is discharged from the service after a few months for hayfever. However, the films and their characters are quite different. Woodrow is nowhere nearly the cartoon figure that Norval was. His first-sequence monologue on the history of the Marines—shot in close-up—cues us to take him seriously, as do the Marines, the townspeople, his mother, and Libby, his girl friend. Libby herself is earnest, intelligent, and articulate, not the cartoon character that Trudy was.

Satirizing the subject of heroism in wartime in any case required special care. The Marines could not be cartooned—even crazy Bugsy is a good guy—and their campaign to help Woodrow, however casually begun, had to be crowned with success. The irony of Woodrow's election as mayor lies at a deeper, far more ambiguous, level of textuality than Norval's ascendancy to national prominence, which is a cruel joke on him and a comment on the inanity of success and failure in America. Woodrow's election, on the contrary, is necessary to balance his father's sacrifice in World War I. (*Hero's* pattern of justice fulfilling itself in a later generation connects it to certain Shakespeare plays and indeed to Greek drama.)

Next to his dialogue, Sturges is probably best known for the breathless pace of his films, and *Hero* has, arguably, the best pacing (and possibly the best dialogue) of any Sturges film.* It is also the best-constructed. This combination is not surprising since pace, like dialogue, depends ultimately upon construction. Sturges's revisions of his scripts and films show the interdependence of these factors—a change in one inevitably affected the

others. He was particularly adept at finding new balances among them as he improved one or the other from version to version. The remarkable headlong pace of *Hero*, its hurtling forward through spiraling misunderstandings, is the result of revisions and cuts, many quite small, at each stage of its making.

Sturges's first note on *Hero* is a two-page story idea dated May 29, 1943. On June 11 he submitted to Paramount a thirteen-page "original story" called *Hail the Conquering Hero*, which was promptly approved for production. The screenplay itself was finished by July 12, and shooting took place between mid-July and mid-September. The dialogue continuity of September 20 shows that Sturges stayed quite close to the script. From this point the fate of the film becomes mysterious. On the basis of mixed audience response at December previews, production chief Buddy DeSylva threatened cuts and retakes, as he had already done with the unreleased *Great Without Glory*. Sturges's contract expired on December 10. In contract negotiations he demanded more control of his films, and when Paramount refused he left the studio with three films unreleased.

Morgan's Creek was a huge success upon its release in January 1944, but the recut *Hero* displeased preview audiences in February. Thus Sturges got a second chance to put *Hero* back together and, indeed, to improve it. In March and April, unpaid, he wrote and shot a new ending for the film and undid the damage that the Paramount editors had done. In August the film was released. We know by comparing the September 1943 dialogue continuity with the released film that Sturges made changes in other parts of the film besides the ending, notably in the kaleidoscopic

*What is pace in film? It cannot be defined abstractly because it is not an independent quality—pace is always the pace of something. The most effective pacing is that most appropriate to the something in question. Perhaps the best general treatment of the subject is Eisenstein's discussion of metric, rhythmic, and tonal montage in "A Dialectical Approach to Film Form." Eisenstein demonstrates, in Hegelian manner, that length of shot, movement from shot to shot, and the dominant theme or quality of the passage as a whole are not only intertwined as categories but thoroughly dependent on the subject in question. The what and the how are two aspects of the same thing.

reception sequence. He also eliminated some small scenes, some speeches, and a fair amount of incidental dialogue throughout the film. These changes, while extensive, are of a particularly intimate or “internal” sort. They do not take the film in a new direction but they quicken its rhythms and sharpen its focus. Perfecting what was already a remarkable dramatic and cinematic structure, these changes make *Hero* what many regard as Sturges’s best film.

Hero’s opening sequence, which brings Woodrow and the six Marines together, begins quite slowly, helping to create the sense of a chance meeting. The rest of the film, which develops the consequences of this meeting, is a mad rush, what one of the characters calls a “snowslide.” What might be called the snowslide principle in fact governs the script’s revisions of the story, the film’s revisions of the script, and the revised conclusion of script and film.

The script’s reception sequence cuts from Woodrow and the Marines on the train to a kaleidoscopic series of scenes of the townspeople waiting for Woodrow. This ten-page interlude allows Sturges to introduce an entire network of relationships—romantic, familial, and political—that Woodrow will step into and affect. Woodrow will bounce like a ball among the individuals and groups gathered at the station and we must know who they are before the process can begin.

The reception sequence is such a tour de force that it threatens to stop the film, or at least the snowslide, but Sturges expertly keeps the momentum going in a number of ways. For one thing, he makes the reception ceremony itself quite brief—much of the script’s dialogue for the scene is either cut or drowned out by the crowd and band noise. Also omitted is a brief scene in the back of a car between Woodrow and Libby, the girl he left behind, in which she says twice to a distracted Woodrow that she has something to tell him. Getting only a blank “What?” in response, she says she will tell him later. Why doesn’t she just tell him then and there that she is now engaged to the mayor’s son? There are reasons why she does not do so, but spelling them out at this early point in the film would be awkward. Far better, as the released film has it, that she genuinely try again and again to tell



*Sturges directing Eddie Bracken in
HAIL THE CONQUERING HERO.*

Woodrow the news, only to be foiled each time by the cascade of events engulfing him—each of which also adds to the difficulty of her task and to the process that finally convinces her to change her mind.

Sturges also keeps the momentum going by eliminating wherever he can the transition shots and scene-setting shots specified by the script. This serves the snowslide principle by hurtling the action constantly forward without interval or break. Also, by cutting directly to scenes, often already in progress, without separately introducing their exterior, or even interior, settings, Sturges assumes and thereby strongly suggests our familiarity with them in advance—railroad station, church, mayor’s office, auditorium. This increases our participation in Woodrow’s and the town’s dilemmas and, from Woodrow’s perspective, turns the film’s action into a nightmarish phenomenology of horrible events streaming by without transitions, separations, or scene-settings.

Sturges’s new ending for the film smooths out the chronology of events in a number of ways and supplies a conclusion that sustains the intensity of the rest of the revised film. It avoids in particular the script’s anticlimactic scenes that show the mayoral campaign and election (and the Marine farewell after that). The new ending simply eliminates them, while making it clear that Woodrow will win the election. Whereas the script’s climax took place on the Truesmith front porch, the new ending has Woodrow and Libby pack and go to the train station with five of the Marines. It is here that the town, led by Sgt. Heffelfinger, confronts Woodrow and asks him to run for mayor even though he is not a hero. The train arrives and the six Marines board it

and leave. So the new ending tops the emotional scene in which the townspeople ask Woodrow to run for mayor with the equally emotional farewell to the Marines. It thus compresses the two climaxes into one final train station scene, and thereby achieves symmetry with the reception sequence as well as considerable dramatic acceleration. The snow-slide principle is sustained to the very end of the film.

Hero's revision process also transforms the central relationships between Woodrow and Libby and between Woodrow and the Sergeant. These changes affect the film's pace in a more subtle way than those discussed above.

The script and film reinvent the story's Libby—she now links the two families (the Nobles and the Truesmiths), their two spaces, the two candidates for mayor, and the two young men. The extended drama of her choice between these groups, and her physical movements between their respective spaces constitute a focus for the film second in importance only to Woodrow's own dilemma. The story's Libby has remained true-blue so that there is nothing for her to do but to ask Woodrow why he has not kissed her and whether he is still in love with her, and to show her loyalty when he is exposed as a fraud. The Libby of the script and film is a far more complex character and a dynamic link between the two stories.

The story's Woodrow talks with the Sergeant in the saloon, then argues with him on the train and in his room while he is changing out of his uniform and also at the end of the day when the Marines put him to bed. In the screenplay, Sturges greatly expands the number of scenes between them and the amount of dialogue they speak. Sturges also spreads their encounters throughout the film so that they become, in effect, a single, long, interrupted dialogue. In scene after scene, indeed, Woodrow and the Sergeant start talking to each other as though continuing a conversation rather than beginning one. (This is one of the secrets of Sturges's superb dialogue generally, although it is rarely—if ever—carried throughout an entire film as here.) Their exchanges also comment on each stage of the snowsliding action, allowing us to gauge Woodrow's mounting despair and to marvel at the

unflappable Sergeant's increasingly outrageous assurances and rationalizations.

It could be argued that these changes amount to a revolution in Sturges's dramatic method. Instead of writing and directing discrete comic scenes, each with its build-up, high points, and climax, Sturges here tends to run his scenes together, with motifs like Woodrow's conflicts with the Sergeant, Libby's attempts to tell Woodrow her news, and the town's hysteria continuing from scene to scene without a break. Perhaps this is something like Wagner's substitution of "endless melody" for opera based upon the unit of the discrete aria.

NOTES

1. Nearly 100 boxes of Sturges material are located in the Special Collections Department of the University of California at Los Angeles.
2. James Curtis, *Between Flops: A Biography of Preston Sturges* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1982), pp. 177-178.
3. André Bazin, *The Cinema of Cruelty: From Buñuel to Hitchcock*, ed. François Truffaut (New York: Seaver, 1982), p. 40.

STATEMENT OF OWNERSHIP, MANAGEMENT AND CIRCULATION, 12/1/84

Title: **Film Quarterly**. Frequency: Quarterly. Four issues published annually. Subscription price: \$10.00 individuals, \$18.00 institutions. Location of office of publication: 2120 Berkeley Way, Berkeley, Alameda County, CA 94720. Headquarters of publishers: Same. Publisher: University of California Press, 2120 Berkeley Way, Berkeley, CA 94720. Editor: Ernest Callenbach, University of California Press, Berkeley, CA 94720. Owner: The Regents of the University of California, Berkeley, CA 94720. The purpose, function and nonprofit status of this organization and the exempt status for Federal income tax purposes have not changed during preceding 12 months.

Extent and nature of circulation:	Av. no. copies each issue pre- ceding 12 months	Actual no. copies of single issue pub. nearest to filing date
A. Total no. copies printed	6888	6828
B. Paid circulation:		
1. Sales through dealers and carriers, street vendors and counter sales	1798	1953
2. Mail subscriptions	3532	3490
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